

# Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

## POSTPARTUM HEALTH

After nine months of carrying around that extra weight, you're probably ready to think about your own fitness, including how to shed those last few pounds that didn't disappear when your baby was born. On average, women gain about 30 pounds during pregnancy, 18 to 20 of which are usually lost within about a month of having the baby. That's when it gets tough. Those last 5 to 10 pounds can be hard to get rid of, but consistent, safe exercise can help you do just that and maintain your well-being, too.

### **BACK IN THE SWING**

Getting back to exercise after the birth of your baby should be a gradual process. Your doctor may start you out with simple exercises for the first week or two, such as Kegel exercises and short, slow walks. Kegel exercises, small contractions of the muscles at the vaginal wall and opening, should be a priority. They will help to repair and strengthen the pelvic floor. Slow walks during this initial period will not only help you to feel you're getting back into a fitness routine, but help you relieve tension and get some fresh air. Don't push yourself — work to establish a regular walking time and keep a steady pace. A full-fledged return to the aerobic activities you participated in pre-pregnancy usually comes around the time of your postpartum doctor's visit, or after about six weeks.

Back pain and posture concerns are still present in the postpartum period. The abdominal wall is loose now that the uterus is no longer pressing against it, and it can't adequately support the lower back. Try to incorporate low-back exercis-

es and range-of-motion movements to ease the strain and strengthen the lower back. You may also experience upper-back strain caused by fatigue and breast weight if you are lactating. Shrugging the shoulders and performing flexibility exercises for the chest and back should provide relief.

### **TONING YOUR MIDDLE**

You may be anxious to begin abdominal exercises, but do only what you're capable of. Pelvic tilts and abdominal compression exercises are a good place to start. Remember to tighten the pelvic floor when performing these since they may place pressure on it and stretch it further. As your pelvic floor gradually becomes stronger, other curl-up exercises may be added.



### **EATING RIGHT**

Your first instinct may be to start eating less to expedite weight loss, but since breast-feeding and increased physical activity require more energy during the postpartum period, it isn't recommended. New mothers who breast-feed their

babies shouldn't cut their calorie intake. In fact, they should increase it. Breast-feeding mothers need to take in an additional 500 calories per day to provide their babies with the proper nutrients. If you skimp on calories, you're less likely to get the nutrients both you and your baby need.

### **CAESAREAN CARE**

If you have had your baby by Caesarean section, your body will need more time to heal and regain strength, and chances are you will feel less like plunging into an exercise routine. Start slow and use caution when exercising, especially with your abdominal muscles. It is important to consult with your doctor to develop a safe exercise program.

### **THAT BOTTOM LINE**

Talk with your doctor before and after delivery to determine the best plan for you to follow once your baby is born, and don't hesitate to consult with them at any time if you have questions. Go slowly with exercise to build a safe foundation for taking care of you and your newborn, and you'll both be on the pathway to good health and well-being.

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